

<< Coda >>

The Language of the Future

by Laurie Anderson

Last year, I was on a twin-engine plane coming from Milwaukee to New York City. Just over La Guardia, one of the engines conked out and we started to drop straight down, flipping over and over. Then the other engine died: and we went completely out of control. New York City started getting taller and taller.

A voice came over the intercom and said:

Our pilot had informed us that we are about to attempt a crash landing.

Please extinguish all cigarettes.

Place your tray tables in their upright, locked position.

Your Captain says: Please do not panic.

Your Captain says: Place your head in your hands.

Captain says: Place your head on your knees.

Captain says: Put your hands on your head.

Put your hands on your knees!

(heh-heh)

This is your Captain.

Have you lost your dog?

We are going down. We are all going down together.

As it turned out, we were caught in a downdraft and rammed into a bank.

It was, in short, a miracle. But afterwards I was terrified of getting onto planes. The moment I started walking down that aisle, my eyes would clamp shut and I would fall into a deep, impenetrable sleep.

You don't want to see this.

You don't want to be here.
Have you lost your dog?

Finally, I was able to remain conscious, but I always had to go up to the forward cabin and ask the stewardesses if I could sit next to them:
"Hi! Uh, mind if I join you?"
They were always rather irritated—"Oh, all right (what a baby)"—and I watched their uniforms crack as we made nervous chitchat. Sometimes even this didn't work, and I'd have to find one of the other passengers to talk to. You can spot these people immediately. There's one on every flight. Someone who's really on *your* wavelength.

I was on a flight from L.A. when I spotted one of them, sitting across the aisle. A girl, about fifteen. And she had this stuffed rabbit set up on her tray table and she kept arranging and rearranging the rabbit and kind of waving to it:
"Hi!" "Hi there!" And I decided: This is the one I want to sit next to. So I sat down and we started to talk and suddenly I realized she was speaking an entirely different language. Computerese. A kind of high-tech lingo. Everything was circuitry, electronics, switching. If she didn't understand something, it just "didn't scan."

We talked mostly about her boyfriend. This guy was never in a bad mood. He was in a bad mode. Modey kind of guy. The romance was apparently kind of rocky and she kept saying:
"Man oh man you know like it's so digital!"

She just meant the relationship was on again, off again.
Always two things switching.
Current runs through bodies— And then it doesn't.
It was a language of sounds, of noise, of switching, of signals.
It was the language of the rabbit, the caribou, the penguin, the beaver.
A language of the past.
Current runs through bodies and then it doesn't. On again. Off again.
Always two things switching. One thing instantly replaces another. It was the language of the future.

PUT YOUR KNEES UP TO YOUR CHIN.
HAVE YOU LOST YOUR DOG?
PUT YOUR HANDS OVER YOUR EYES.

JUMP OUT OF THE PLANE.
THERE IS NO PILOT. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.
THIS IS THE LANGUAGE OF THE ON-AGAIN
OFF-AGAIN FUTURE.
AND IT IS DIGITAL.